



Marielsa A. Bernard

First judge of Hispanic descent in the history of Montgomery County, Maryland

Marielsa Bernard was born in Washington D.C. She attended Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville. Bernard earned a B.A. in Political Science from Loyola College in 1977, and graduated from the Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law in 1980. She was admitted to Maryland Bar in 1981.

Bernard's legal career began in 1978 as a law clerk in the law firm of Ferretti, Ehrlich & Gordon, where in 1981 she became an associate. From 1984 to 1986, she was an associate with Tietz & Ferretti; and from 1986 to 1987, she was an associate with the Law Offices of Vincent E. Ferretti, Jr. From 1987 to January 1997 she was a solo practitioner in Silver Spring. From 1997 to 1998, she was a partner in the law firm of Keiffer, Johnston, Reinstein, Bernard & Heffron, L.L.C. During these years, she also served as a Criminal Justice Act misdemeanor panel attorney for the U.S. District Court and as a CINA panel member for the Montgomery County Public Defender's Office.

In September 1998, Maryland Governor Parris N. Glendening appointed Bernard to the District Court of Maryland for Montgomery County, District 6, becoming the first Hispanic to serve in the Montgomery County judiciary. Since joining the bench, she has presided over criminal misdemeanors, felonies, traffic cases, civil cases, and domestic violence cases. Maryland Court of Appeals Chief Judge Bell appointed Judge Bernard to the Public Trust and Confidence in the Maryland Judicial System Committee in 1999, to the Business and Technology Task Force in 2000, and to the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Bias in 2002.

In 2002, Governor Glendening elevated Bernard to the Montgomery County Circuit Court, 6th Judicial Court. Bernard became the first Latina judge to be appointed to the Circuit Court. Bernard is one of two Hispanic judges of Maryland's 261 judges. Ninety-nine of the 261 judges are women.

Bernard is member of the Maryland State Bar Association (MSBA) where she has held a variety of leadership positions, including serving as Chair of the Hispanic-Latino Lawyers Committee. As Chair she initiated and organized open houses for the Montgomery County District Court in 1996. She served as Co-Chair of the MSBA Leadership Academy Committee. Judge Bernard is past president of the Maryland Hispanic Bar Association, and currently serves on its board. As President she initiated and organized a program of pro bono fairs which won the MSBA People's Pro Bono Award as well as the MSBA Best Service to the Public Award. She is also a member of the Montgomery County Bar Association, where she has chaired several committees, and also was a member of its Executive Committee for the years 2001-2002. Bernard is also very active in the Women's Bar Association of Montgomery County, where she initiated the Take-Your-Daughter-to-Work-Day Program, as well as the Latina Youth Empowerment Conference. She served on the Board of Directors, Maryland Chapter, for the National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ). Bernard is a Fellow of both the Maryland State Bar as well as the Montgomery County Bar Association.

Judge Bernard has committed her career to public service. She has been recognized by several groups for her work benefiting the community, in particular the Hispanic-Latino population. From 1995 to 1998, she was a member of the Hispanic/Latino Advisory Group to the Montgomery County Executive, and received a Citation in 1994 from the Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs. She was also honored for her community service by a County Executive Citation in 1983 and 1998. She is past Vice-President of the Hispanic Alliance, and was a member of its board for many years. Judge Bernard served on the Montgomery County East Advisory Board from 1994 through 1996. While in law practice, she served as a court-appointed mediator and guardian ad litem. She did extensive pro bono work for the East Takoma Park Silver Spring Community Center, the Spanish Catholic Center, and St. Camillus Parish. In addition, Bernard initiated the National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ) Storybook Project in the Jessup, Maryland Correctional Institution for Women. This project assists incarcerated mothers in reading and recording stories for their children. The books, tapes, and tape recorders are later sent to the children so that the bond between mother and child can be maintained.

A resident of Silver Spring, where she lives with her family, Bernard is the daughter of a Peruvian mother and the granddaughter of a Portuguese immigrant from Bermuda. "I have been blessed with opportunities that others don't have. I grew up with the awareness of how lucky I was to have been born here," she told a Montgomery County newspaper in February 2002. Judge Bernard credits her parents for teaching her to work hard and give back to society. "Community service is part of the rent we pay for living."

SOURCES:

- www.gov.state.md.us
- www.mdarchives.state.md.us
- Circuit Court for Montgomery County, Maryland